



Fact-Checking President Donald Trump on False Christian Refugee Stats

January 29, 2017

On the same day as he announced a halt on entries from Syria and six other predominantly Muslim countries, President Donald Trump claimed the United States was discriminating against Christians in its refugee admission policy.

Trump's executive order declaring the ban includes an exemption for persecuted religious minorities.

In an interview with the Christian Broadcast Network, Trump explained: "If you were a Christian in Syria it was impossible, at least very, very tough to get into the United States. If you were a Muslim, you could come in, if you were a Christian, it was impossible."

This is a claim we heard from Trump during the 2016 election, and it's inaccurate. It rates False.

Christians make up a very small fraction of Syrians admitted under the refugee program, but they have been able to enter the United States. There is no evidence that this is an outcome of discriminatory policy. Refugee admissions skew in favor of Christians in other countries.

Admissions numbers

From Jan. 1, 2012 (the year the first Syrian refugees began arriving) to Jan. 29, 2017, the United States admitted 19,324 refugees from Syria.

According to federal data, this included 19,025 Muslims and 199 Christians. (Another 86 belonged to other religions or no religion at all.)

So, right off the bat, Trump is wrong that it was "impossible" to enter the United States as a Christian.

Christians do make up a small fraction of refugee admissions compared with their makeup in the overall population of Syria. (We'll explain why that may be later.) But they did come in; it was not "impossible," as Trump said.

Muslims made up about 98 percent of Syrian refugees, compared with about 87 percent of Syria's population, as of Jan. 12, 2017, according to the CIA World Factbook. Christians, meanwhile, were 10 percent of the population but just 1 percent of refugees. (The Pew Research Center meanwhile says about 5 percent of Syrians are Christians.)

This pattern, however, doesn't exist for the other countries targeted by Trump's ban. In some cases, the reverse is true: The proportion of Christian refugee admissions are greater than the proportion of Christians living the country.

Here's a breakdown of refugee admissions by country and religion in the time frame (Jan. 1, 2012 to Jan. 29, 2017):

	Christian refugees	Christian population	Muslim refugees	Muslim population
<u>Syria</u>	1%	10%	98%	87%
<u>Iran</u>	49%	0.9%*	9%	99%*
<u>Iraq</u>	26%	0.8%	71%	99%
<u>Sudan</u>	13%	5%*	79%	91%*
<u>Somalia</u>	0.2%	0.2%*	99.8%	99.8%*
<u>Libya</u>	0%**	2.7%	100%**	97%
<u>Yemen</u>	27%	0.2%*	60%	99.1%*

**These figures come from the Pew Research Center's 2015 Religion and Public Life Project, given incomplete data from the CIA World Fact Book.*

***The United States has accepted a total of 10 Libyan refugees from Jan. 1, 2012 to Jan. 29, 2017.*

Experts say no evidence of religious discrimination

When we looked into Trump's claim in July 2015, all the experts we spoke with said Trump's accusation is off base. A year and half later, there's still no evidence that Christians have a higher bar to clear for entry.

David Martin, an immigration law expert at the University of Virginia who previously held posts at the Departments of State, Justice and Homeland Security, acknowledged that Christian Syrians make up a smaller number of admissions than they do the overall population.

But he said, "there are many possible explanations and this certainly doesn't reflect a general hostility to Christians."

One possible explanation for the few number of Christian Syrians admitted, the Washington Post's Fact-Checker reported, is an initial religious disparity at the United Nations' refugee programs. (The long vetting process for refugees seeking entry to the United States begins with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee.)

The UNHCR reports that 1.5 percent of the nearly 5 million Syrian refugees it has registered are Christian. Agency spokespeople have warned against speculation but suggested this may be because Syrian Christians have the means to move without seeking assistance from the United Nations.

In October 2015, then-U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and current U.N. Secretary General António Guterres offered a few other theories.

Christians in Syria "have been less systematically victimized than they were in Iraq," he said. "Most of the Syrian Christians have moved to Lebanon. And in Lebanon, the first thing that happened to me when I met with the Lebanese president ... when I asked him to start a resettlement program from Lebanon, (he said), don't resettle Christians because they are vital for us."

Ann Richard, then-assistant secretary of state for population refugees and migration, suggested in a congressional hearing in December 2015 that Christian Syrians aren't looking to move out of the country.

"A disproportionate number of Syrians staying in the country are Christian. Now why is this? It's because a higher percentage of them support Assad and feel safer with him there," she said during her testimony.

Regardless of the disparity in Syria, experts did not agree with Trump's suggestion that Christians face additional hurdles.

"The U.S. government does not discriminate on the basis of religion in refugee admission or resettlement, and if you look at refugee admissions by religion over the past 10 years, rather than just at the Syrian refugees in the past few years, there are likely more Christians than Muslims," Karen Jacobsen, a professor at Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy, told us previously.

Martin pointed out that since 2004, Christians have made up about 46 percent of refugee admissions from Iraq. That's disproportionate to the country's total Christian population by a factor of about 58.

Geoffrey Mock, a Middle East specialist for Amnesty International USA, said Amnesty has documented a myriad of human rights violations in the refugee resettlement process, but not religious discrimination "because we haven't see any of it from the U.S. side."

Where do terrorists come from?

Trump's executive order temporarily suspends the admission into the United States of people from seven Muslim-majority countries and indefinitely bans refugees from war-torn Syria. After its announcement, protesters gathered at the nation's largest airports.

Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., said in a CNN interview from New York's John F. Kennedy Airport that it was important to protect the United States from people who want to harm the country. But he argued that refugees are heavily vetted by the U.S. government and that recent attacks have not been from nationals of the countries singled out by Trump.

"The various people who have, in fact, committed terrorist acts in this country, from 9/11 on, none of them came from any of the seven countries that are the subject of the president's executive order," Nadler said in a CNN interview Jan. 28. "If you really want to protect this country, why are Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey left out of the order? Most of the 9/11 conspirators came from Saudi Arabia."

Trump's executive order signed Jan. 27, called "Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States," suspended for 90 days the immigrant and nonimmigrant entry of people from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen.

Individuals from those seven countries who are U.S. lawful permanent residents are also stopped from re-entering the country (though exemptions may apply), the New York Times reported, attributing the information to the Department of Homeland Security.

We wondered if Nadler was correct by saying that since 9/11, terrorist acts in the United States have not been carried out by people from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen.

Experts told us no fatal attack has been attributed to nationals from those countries, but that there have been a few non-deadly acts by individuals from two of those countries. Nadler's statement rates Half True.

Increased homegrown terrorism

According to New America, a think tank compiling information on terrorist activities in the United States since 9/11, 94 people have been killed by jihadists in the past 15 years.

But in its overview of who are the individuals committing the attacks, New America says the majority of attackers come from within.

"Far from being foreign infiltrators, the large majority of jihadist terrorists in the United States have been American citizens or legal residents. Moreover, while a range of citizenship statuses are represented, every jihadist who conducted a lethal attack inside the United States since 9/11 was a citizen or legal resident," the New America study says. "In addition about a quarter of the extremists are converts, further confirming that the challenge cannot be reduced to one of immigration."

"It's certainly the case that none of the major, deadly attacks carried out in the United States were carried out by people from these countries," said Erin Miller, who manages the Global Terrorism Database for the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism at the University of Maryland.

Other experts agreed.

"Since 9/11, no one has been killed in this country in a terrorist attack by anyone who emigrated from any of the seven countries," added William C. Banks, director of the Institute for National Security and Counterterrorism at Syracuse University College of Law.

In June 2016, Omar Mateen, born in the United States to Afghan parents, killed 49 people and wounded 53 others in an Orlando nightclub shooting. In December 2015, a Pakistani woman, Tashfeen Malik, and her husband killed 14 people in San Bernardino, Calif. The husband, Syed Rizwan Farook, was born in the United States to Pakistani parents.

However, there have been at least three non-deadly attacks in which the perpetrators were from Iran or Somalia, said John Mueller, a political scientist at Ohio State University, expert on terrorism and a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute.

One of those examples includes the November 2016 attack at Ohio State University by a Somali refugee who had lived in Pakistan before coming to the United States. Abdul Razak Ali Artan, 18, was shot dead by a police officer after he slammed his car into pedestrians and injured others with a butcher knife. The FBI said it would investigate the attack as a "potential act of terrorism."

In September 2016, Dahir Adan was shot dead after stabbing nine people in a Minnesota shopping mall. Adan was identified by his father as Somali but born in Kenya, moving to the United States when he was a child.

Another incident was in 2006, when Mohammed Reza Taheri-Azar ran a Jeep Cherokee into a crowd of people at his alma mater, the University of North Carolina. Thinking he would be killed during the attack, Taheri-Azar left a letter in his apartment saying he wanted revenge for the deaths of Muslims across the world caused by the United States, the AP reported. A naturalized citizen born in Iran, Taheri-Azar in 2008 plead guilty to nine counts of attempted first-degree murder and was sentenced for up to 33 years in prison.

On ABC's *This Week*, Trump's press secretary, Sean Spicer, said the president's order covered countries that the Obama administration had identified as needing further travel restrictions.

"What the president did was take the first step through this executive order of insuring that we're looking at the entire system of who's coming in, refugees that are coming in, people who are coming in from places that have a history or that our intelligence suggests that we need to have further extreme vetting for," Spicer said Jan. 29.

Starting in early 2016, individuals from countries that participate in the visa waiver program (that is, people allowed to travel to the United States without a visa) and who had also been in Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Syria, Yemen, Libya or Somalia recently (with exceptions for diplomatic or military purposes) were no longer permitted to come to the United States without a visa. They were not banned from traveling, but they did need to apply for a visa and be vetted.

People who were nationals of Iran, Iraq, Sudan, or Syria were also no longer able to come to the United States without a visa.